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The Bookshelf

Schlesinger's Version Of the Kennedy Term

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Arthur M. Schlesinger's massive narrative, "A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House," inevitably challenges comparison with Theodore Sorensen's work on a similar subject. Both men were aides of the late President; Sorensen on a more regular basis and for a longer time; both approach Kennedy from a standpoint of enthusiastic admiration for his personality, his ideals and aims.

Sorensen, who probably possesses a larger store of first-hand information, is more reserved and discreet; Schlesinger is less inhibited in his personal references and deals pretty roughly with Secretary Rusk, whom, he says, Kennedy intended to drop in the event of his election to a second term. As might be expected from his background, Schlesinger excels in literary facility and in organization of historical facts, although Sorensen seems to dramatize more successfully Kennedy's supreme crisis and greatest victory: The facing down of Khrushchev on the issue of removing Soviet missiles from Cuba. Schlesinger does supply the item that the ice was to some extent broken by talks between a Soviet Embassy official named Fomin and a broadcasting correspondent, John Scali.

It was in Arthur Schlesinger's home in Cambridge (he was for some years professor of history at Harvard) that President-elect Kennedy conducted an informal conference with a number of members of the Harvard faculty whom he brought into Government service. The normal quiet of an academic residential area was disturbed by the screaming sirens of police cars as a motorcade drove up in the wake of the newly chosen Chief Executive. Schlesinger, who was already on fairly intimate terms with Kennedy, was one of those tapped and served the President in various ways.

Schlesinger, like Sorensen, faced the problem of keeping the figure of Kennedy clearly in view against a background of the enormous number of events, big and small, foreign and domestic, with which a President of the United States is inevitably involved. Perhaps the man Kennedy would have emerged more vividly and clearly in a work less crowded with historical details. But Schlesinger's observations, like Sorensen's, will be an invaluable source of factual material for the future historian.

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The author presents Kennedy as a man broadly progressive, but quite alien to fanaticism and utopian dreams, eminently pragmatic, balancing what should be done with the consideration of what, in the imperfect state of human nature, can be done. Or, to quote the author:

"All these things, co-existing within him, enabled others to find in him what qualities they wanted. They could choose one side of him or the other and claim him, according to taste, as a conservative, because of his sober sense of the frailty of man, the power of institutions and the frustrations of history, or as a progressive, because of his vigorous confidence in reason, action and the future. But his youth, his vitality, his profound modernity—these were final elements in his power and potentiality."

Of Rusk, whom he regarded as an "organization man," his judgment is far less favorable:

"His mind, for all its strength and clarity, was irrevocably conventional. . . . He seemed actually to prefer stale to fresh ways of saying things. . . . As he would talk on and on in his even, low voice, a Georgia drawl sounding distantly under the professional tones of a foundation executive, the world itself seemed to lose reality and dissolve into a montage of platitudes. . . . Since his subordinates did not know what he thought, they could not do what he wanted. In consequence he failed to imbue the Department with positive direction and purpose. He had authority but not command. . . .

"He was equally baffling at the White House. Where McNamara and Dillon would forcefully and articulately assert the interests of their departments in impending foreign policy decisions, Rusk would sit quietly by, with his Buddha-like face and half-smile, often leaving it to Bundy or to the President himself to assert the diplomatic interest. If the problem were an old one, he was generally in favor of continuing what Herter or Dulles or Acheson had done before him. If the problem were new it was generally impossible to know what he thought."

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According to Schlesinger, the self-effacement of the Vice Presidency was a sore trial for Lyndon Johnson, and he found escape and compensation in his foreign trips, during which he whirled through 33 countries, "scattering ballpoint pens, cigaret lighters and general pandemonium in his wake and returning with trunks of gifts for his friends."

Among the diplomatic odd jobs to which Schlesinger was assigned was the very painful one of breaking the news of the Bay of Pigs disaster to the Cuban exile leaders, of whom many had one or more relatives involved in this ill-conceived venture. Because he was so close to this tragedy his writing here takes on a special poignancy.

At times Berlin seemed to overshadow every other issue; indeed it is highly probable that the freedom of West Berlin was saved when Khrushchev agreed to withdraw his missiles from Cuba. The author made several trips abroad on behalf of the President and discusses with the authority of special insight the various phases of the Berlin crisis and also more recent developments across the Atlantic. Unfortunately, but perhaps naturally, difficulties within the NATO alliance have multiplied as Soviet pressure, for the time being, has relaxed. Even before Khrushchev's fall from power Paris was causing the State Department as much concern as Moscow.

There is a good deal of background information on the big issues in American-European relations, especially the problem, still very much alive, of how to reconcile American technological insistence on a unified nuclear deterrent with the European psychological desire for a larger voice in its own nuclear defense.

The historical element predominates over the biographical in this work which is part history, part biography. But there are touches of artistic imagination, as when the author, recalling that Kennedy's burial, like his inauguration, was accompanied by snow, ends with the short simple sentence: "It all ended, as it began, in the cold."

A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House. By Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Houghton Mifflin. 1,087 pages. $9.